

For beginners who might otherwise waste their time with bad methods, this is what I've learned about ear-training (some of this may sound strange, but it all works well):

The most helpful form of ear training I've found is a modified form of transposing melodies and chord progressions: first, memorize a melody, and then play it on an instrument starting from a different tonic (or whatever the starting note is) -- the thing is to not let your fingers do any of the work for you. I found that playing the melody on a guitar, but only using one finger, and only one string, with eyes closed (close your eyes as much as possible with any music), forces you to rely entirely on your ears -- it will sound terrible to anyone listening to you, because you'll miss a lot of notes, but the point is to hear when the notes are on or off, and off by how much. Fretless stringed instruments are probably best for this, but woodwinds, piano, etc., are bad since you can tell by your fingers to some extent whether you're on the right or wrong notes.

This method also works well for 3-part chord progressions (4-part is too wide a vocal range for most chord progressions), in major and minor, only remember to limit using your fingers as much as possible, using only one string and one finger always (playing them as arpeggios, just as you sing them). The melodies you can get from any sight-singing book, but the chord progressions you'll have to make up yourself, but you can recycle the same ones by switching the direction of the notes (for example, starting with the top note instead of the bottom). These exercises can be transposed any number of times, but you'll probably start to tire of them after playing them in more than two or three keys. It's also a good idea to go over the same ones for a couple of sessions, until they're easy, so you don't get discouraged.

Also, if you use a drone (tonic-dominant, or an octave on the tonic) for the singing part (and playing, if you're using a fretless instrument), it will noticeably improve your sense of intonation. Software programs like Audacity (which is free) can generate these sine tones. (This isn't necessary, and neither is memorizing the notes, but both are worthwhile.)

A variation on this method is to play a starting note, sing or hum it, and then sing a given interval or chord from that note -- then sound it on your instrument and listen to the notes clearly, arpeggiating them mentally. Then go to another starting note (a major second away, or perfect fourth, or whatever-- some intervals are easier than others) and do the same thing, going up an octave or so this way -- it takes time, but it's effective, especially with learning difficult chords, like augmented and diminished triads, etc.

After these methods, transcription seems to be the most helpful, though here are a few tips for getting the most out of it: first, take the time to find a good recording of a good performance -- you'll pick up nuances of style this way that are lacking in lesser performances. Always have a copy of the score to check your work, and make a note (no pun intended) of any mistakes you make, to go back and review them next time. Determine as much as you can about the performance before looking at the score: meter, tempo, dynamics, articulation (even if the latter don't always square with the recording). Also, transcribe by units (intervals being the smallest units), not by individual notes (unless it's an isolated drone note in the bass, for example), since this practice is to develop relative pitch, not perfect pitch per-se. Especially, make sure to sing or hum every single note you write down. Note interesting things, such as unusual cadences or voice-leading, and review these next time -- you'll pick up a lot this way. (Also, if you're a broke student, you might want to invest in a dry-erase board, to save money on manuscript paper in the long run -- and you need to do a lot to perceive the benefits.)

Plain singing is for me third-most helpful method of ear-training, and using “movable do”, but not transposing, seems to work best. This means that you’ll sometimes have to make octave leaps not written in the part, but as it’s likely that everyone has some capacity for perfect pitch, getting used to keys untransposed from what you’re reading will, I think, make those absolute pitches more memorable – you’ll certainly get used to the feel of the keys in your vocal chords more quickly, without the extra, unnecessary mental step of transposing.

The least-helpful ear training is software programs that sound random intervals and chords outside a tonal context. Also ignore sales pitches promising perfect pitch, for two reasons: first, if there were a way to easily learn this, EVERYONE would have it; second, the methods I outlined above will eventually have you recognizing notes and chords without reference to an instrument, but it takes a lot of practice before this happens.

The most important thing though, regardless of specific method, is to do the right amount -- too much or too little are equally ineffective -- it should feel like a workout, but not a light one or a grueling one. On that note, and as far as the first method goes, close position chord progressions are easier to start with than those in open position, diatonic are easier than chromatic, etc.; for a beginning transcriber, easy piano pieces are a much better starting place than organ fugues, etc.

Some more things about ear training to keep in mind is that it's a long-term effort, and if you're unwilling to devote real time and energy to it (at least an hour per day), you're unlikely to make much progress (it also means that you're an amateur, because a musician neglecting ear training is similar to a painter neglecting drawing -- it doesn't make much sense for serious students of the art). At the same time, if you've been putting in a lot of effort for many months, and haven't noticed any improvement, that probably means you've reached your natural limits and might want to devote your time to something else. Also avoid burnout -- I found that doing the transposing exercise every other day, and transcribing every other day, allowed for enough variety to make a long-term effort possible. Variety is another important means to defend against burnout -- for example, transcribe different kinds of music. Also, as a final tip, hum things throughout your day -- walking, in the shower, etc. -- it keeps your brain in music mode, instead of word mode, for example.